

Statism: Opiate of the Elites

by Theodore J. Forstmann

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A graduate of Yale and the Columbia School of Law, Mr. Forstmann is an outspoken champion of expanding opportunity and economic growth. In this article, he argues that we have forgotten the Golden Rule in business and politics. Worse yet, we have traded our biblical principles and individual responsibilities for the empty promises of secularism and statism. While the State surely struggles against God and His authority, author Forstmann suggests that the State is truly trying to replace God . . . to "become" god.

I'm encouraged to see this article's ideals are embraced

by wealthy and influential people like Mr. Forstmann, Paul Newman and Norman Schwarzkopf. These folks are not "holy rollers" or "Bible thumpers", they're generally corporate executives. Perhaps the principals of constitutional government are beginning to penetrate the boardroom.

Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. The power and significance of these eleven words reside in the fact that they represent a *spiritual* truth. This is not simply because Jesus said on the Mount, "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." Nor even because it is written in Mosaic law: "whatever is hurtful to you, do not do to any other person." The spiritual authority of the Golden Rule is grounded in an even more basic assumption: that there is a Creator and we are all *equal* in His eyes.

Our democracy¹ was founded on this basic assumption, which is why we pledge our allegiance to "one nation under God." From this flows the self-evident truths: "that all men are created equal²; that they are en-

dowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights." What follows is that the individual is the spiritual center of society, and the Golden Rule is equally self-evident.

From Golden Rule to Statist Rule

But in our day many of our leaders believe that the state – not the individual – is now the spiritual center of society. According to this view known as "statism," government assumes a moral importance that outweighs individual claims. Statists do not speak of government as a collection of bureaucrats, agencies, and limited constitutional powers but as the embodiment of the collective good – as the community itself.

They believe that government should make decisions for individuals. Since individuals usually prefer to make their own decisions, coercion and compulsion become necessary correctives. This is why the statist has no use for the Golden Rule. The statist does not do unto others as he would have others do unto him. The others aren't to do at all; they are to be done to and done for.

If it is true, as philosopher Michael Novak once observed, that "each immoral action sows its own irrationality into the pattern of events," a government that breaks the moral laws encoded in the Golden Rule will have a profound effect on all those living under it. The genesis and genius of the Golden Rule is that it is a *two-way* street. Statism, on the other hand, is a *one-way* street. The Golden Rule teaches us that we are all brothers. Statism teaches us that we are the children, and government is the parent. In fact, statisticians are looking for far more than a maternal embrace in the arms of big government. They are looking for nothing less than a New Jerusalem, literally for redemption *through the state*.

Every human being has a need to believe and belong. Traditionally this impulse found expression through religion. But with the decline of clerical power in the 18th century, the search for salvation did not come to an end. Instead the intellectuals of the day began to look elsewhere for idols and answers, for kinship and community. As Paul Johnson observes in *Intellectuals*:

For the first time in human history . . . men arose to assert that they could diagnose the ills of society and cure them with their own unaided intellects: more, that they could devise formulae whereby not merely the structure of society but the fundamental habits of human beings could be transformed [These] were not servants and interpreters of the gods but substitutes. Their hero was Prometheus, who stole the celestial fire and brought it to earth.

In 1789, the Promethean

spark burst into the flames of the French Revolution. Historian Will Durant recounts that revolutionary leaders "proclaimed a new theology in which Nature would be God, and heaven would be an earthly utopia in which all men would be good." The Cathedral of Notre Dame was renamed the Temple of Reason, priests and nuns were ordered to marry, and cemeteries were required to post inscriptions telling the public that "death is an eternal sleep."

As the revolutionary zeal spilled over into the 19th century, the French battle standard was planted in the great capitals of Europe — Vienna, Warsaw, Berlin, and Moscow. A German college professor, watching from his window as Napoleon's victorious *Grand Armee* passed by, exclaimed: "I saw the World Spirit riding upon a white horse!" This was Georg Hegel, who would attempt to marry God and government at the altar of philosophy: "The Universal is to be found in the State," he said, and "the State is the Divine Idea as it exists on earth We must therefore worship the State as the Manifestation of the Divine on earth."

Half a century later; Marx picked up where Hegel left off, promising that socialism could become the "functional equivalent of religion." Religion, said Marx, was

nothing more than "the sigh of a distressed creature . . . the spirit of spiritless conditions . . . the *opiate of the masses*."

In a sense, Marx was the John the Baptist of the statist faith in the 20th century. The fact that so many were baptized in this faith confirms British writer G. K. Chesterton's observation that "when men cease to believe in God, they will not believe in nothing, they will believe in anything." From this perspective, it becomes clear that statism is more than a mere ideology. It is *statism* that has become "the spirit of spiritless conditions" and the opiate, not of the masses, but of the elites.

The forward march of statism

This realization is essential to understanding the forward march of statism in the United States. As Robert Bork describes in *Slouching Toward Gomorrah*: "The search for a 'politics of meaning' is a feature of modern liberalism, and reflects the human yearning for the transcendental by persons for whom religion no longer fills that need." But he also observes that "politics as a transcendental value cannot be satisfied by the compromises of democratic processes."

So how have the statist

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overcome our democratic processes, constitutional restraints, and historical distrust of state power? First, they have adopted a conscious strategy to pay us to value security over freedom. Second, they have manipulated our language. And third, they have used our law and our courts in ingenious ways to overcome popular will.

Valuing security over freedom

The first part of this strategy puts a new twist on an old fable about a kingdom and a tainted well: One of the king's men bursts through the palace doors and rushes up to the throne. "Your highness," he says, "the city well is tainted, and all who have drunk from it have gone mad. Your subjects are marching on the castle to demand your head. You must flee at once!" The king pondered this message for several moments and then made a startling move. He fetched water from the well and drank it himself. Thereafter the mad king ruled his mad kingdom in perfect harmony.

The story of statism in America is similar but reversed: The elites have drunk deeply from the well of

political salvation, inducing visions of government-engineered utopia. The problem is that ordinary people do not understand, do not trust, and even fear such visions. The alleged solution is to give as many people as possible a taste of entitlement — to give everyone, as our president likes to say "a stake in the system."

The most dramatic bid for this goal was the Clinton administration's failed health care initiative. We all know that it sought policy advice from countries that had socialized medicine, but did you know it received political advice as well? Social Democrats in the German parliament advised that the surest path to becoming a permanent governing party was to socialize health care. Beyond placing another 10 percent of the GNP under government control, this would — for the first time — make a majority of Americans irrevocably dependent on the state.

What our statisticians had hoped to achieve was what the French economist Frederic Bastiat described when he said, "The state is that great fictitious entity by which everyone seeks to live

at the expense of everyone else." In statist terms, this is what is called "community," and anyone who questions this equation is accused of opposing "shared values" and "the common good."

Today these accusations dominate the debate over Social Security reform, precluding any meaningful discussion of how to improve retirement security. Our current system was essentially introduced in 1889 by German chancellor Prince Otto von Bismarck — twenty years before the first Model-T rolled off the tracks. It does not incorporate *anything* we have learned with regard to markets and investments over the past one hundred years. And yet any suggestion that the system might be improved through modernization, choice, and privatization is met by Luddite-like opposition.

In the recently released report by the government-appointed Social Security Advisory Council, Robert Ball (who started working for the government in 1939) argued against privatization on the following grounds: "Social Security is perhaps our strongest expression of community solidarity. Social Security is based on the premise that we're all in this together;



with everyone sharing responsibility not only for contributing to their own and their family's security, but also to the security of everyone else, present and future." A recent *New York Times* editorial put the issue even more bluntly. Privatizing Social Security, it complained, would treat people "as individuals." Can you imagine?

Leave aside for a moment the vast empirical data demonstrating that privatization would improve retirement security, fuel economic growth, and make the system more fair. When opponents attack privatization because they fear it would weaken "community," what they really fear is that it would take *government* out of the picture. The point, it would seem, is not to expand the pie of benefits for each individual retiree; the point is to keep the public piecutters employed.

Manipulating language

When I listen to the lofty sentiments used to defend government redistribution, I reluctantly have to conclude that nowadays only criminals are honorable enough to steal without rhetorical excuses. Which brings me to statism's second means of trying to outwit democracy: the manipulation of language.

We have entered an Orwellian era in which "entitlement" replaces responsibility, coercion is described as compassion, compulsory redistribution is called sharing, race quotas substitute for diversity, and suicide is prescribed as "death with dignity." Political discourse has become completely corrupted. The reason is that if you tell people directly that you want to raise their taxes, transfer their wealth, count

them by skin color or let doctors kill them, most will object. Statists know this and therefore are obliged to obfuscate.

In one of the most striking examples, abortion is now discussed in terms of "reproductive health." This sounds absolutely unobjectionable — who, after all, is opposed to health? The same thing goes for the term "pro-choice." How can you be an American and be against choice? Both terms do an effective job of obscuring the real issue, which is life or death for an unborn child. Of course, this becomes a lot more difficult to do when the child in question is very near to being born. This is why advocates are so uncomfortable with the debate over partial-birth abortion. So brutal is this act, that abortion advocates essentially refuse to discuss it. Vicki Saporta, executive director of the National Abortion Federation, says simply: "There

is no such thing as a 'partial-birth abortion' 'Intact dilation and evacuation' is an accepted medical technique."

I agree: there is no such thing as a partial-birth abortion. In order to use the language properly we must acknowledge that when a child is killed just moments before it can breathe its first breath, it is not abortion. The procedure Ms. Saporta so blithely describes is in fact nothing less than infanticide.

In his *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II warned that by tolerating such practices, we have encouraged a "culture of death." This is a world in which relationships are guided not by the Golden Rule, but by the Latin term *cui bono* — who benefits? In such a world, life is truly cheap, whether it is the homeless person we ignore on the street, the dying child in Bosnia, the elderly patient who

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needs medical care, or the tiny life within the womb. This is the inescapable conclusion of modern conceit.

The statist would have you believe that their utopian dreams are evidence of a profoundly imaginative vision. But truly, what could be less imaginative than to think that if you can't see it, touch it, or grasp it, then it doesn't exist? Of course, there is a material order but if there is no underlying natural order and if the only such order that exists is the order we ourselves create, then life necessarily becomes cheapened, and we interfere with decisions made by our Creator.

Overcoming popular will

In such a world, notions of right and wrong that have contributed to civilization's painstaking progress over thousands of years are completely stood on their head. Without absolutes, what is right and what is wrong depends upon your point-of-view. The U.S. Constitution, for example, becomes what is fashionably referred to as a "living document," to be reinterpreted as political expediency demands. This is the justification behind statism's third avenue of assault.

Does anyone believe that, when it comes to defining the fundamentals of our democracy modern lawmakers are more capable than Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, or James Madison? Why not? If the Constitution does not represent enduring truths, why should we give such weight to the words of these dead white males? Thanks to today's legislative and judicial activism, we don't. We have largely abandoned the belief that the Constitution ought to be interpreted according to its original intent, and that is

why the appointment of justices and judges has become one of the fiercest political struggles of our time.

This is convenient for those who want government to assume a role that neither the Constitution will sanction nor the electorate will approve. The real rise of state expansion through judicial fiat began with Franklin D. Roosevelt's attempt to pack the Supreme Court with six more members, a move that failed to change the Court's numbers, but forever changed its reading of the Constitution. If anyone doubts the intent, they should read the following excerpt from FDR's 1935 letter to the House Ways and Means Committee chairman: "I hope your committee will not permit doubts as to constitutionality, however reasonable, to block the suggested legislation."

As legal scholar Roger Pilon has pointed out, the fact that the framers intended limits to government power is made explicit by the Tenth Amendment: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States, respectively or to the people." But where the framers saw islands of government power in the sea of liberty, the New Dealers saw islands of liberty in a sea of government power. Over the past sixty years, the congressional and judicial tide has eroded those small islands of liberty to mere atolls.

We see the culmination of this trend in the ease with which today's courts override democracy whenever voters try to swim against the statist tide. As columnist George Will argues, "Having become

unpersuasive, and hence uneasy in political arenas, liberalism dabbles in democracy but increasingly relies on litigation rather than legislation to achieve its ends." Witness California's Civil Rights Initiative. The language of CCRI was lifted almost word for word from the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act, which stated: "No person in the United States shall, on the grounds of race, color; or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance." After citizens voted overwhelmingly to put an end to preferences, opponents forum-shopped for a sympathetic judge who blocked the new mandate, at least temporarily, on the Orwellian grounds that an end to *preferential* treatment violates constitutional guarantees of *equality*.

It was this type of whimsical interpretation of law that Justice Antonin Scalia commented upon when he asked: "what secret knowledge, one must wonder; is breathed into lawyers when they become justices of this Court? Day by day, case by case, [the Court] is busy designing a Constitution for a country I do not recognize."

The true source of freedom

America is a country many of us are finding increasingly difficult to recognize. *First Things* editor Richard Neuhaus asks whether we have arrived at "the end of democracy" and whether "we have reached or are reaching the point where conscientious citizens can no longer give moral assent to the existing regime." I share his

concern, but I do not share his pessimism.

Democracy is not at an end, but it is in the balance. If my voice is only a cry in the wilderness, so be it. But I am not going to curse the darkness; I am going to light a candle. If we are to change course, we must argue with courage and conviction that there is a natural order. God is. The life He gives must not be taken away. The rights he endows must not be infringed. And humans, however well intentioned, must not seek to usurp the role of the Creator.

When the 19th-century French observer Alexis de Tocqueville peered into the fog of America's future, he said of its citizens: "I do not fear that they will meet with tyrants in their rulers but rather with guardians." A government led by such men, he said, "does not destroy but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till [they are] reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd."

We must not confuse Tocqueville's "government shepherd" with the Good Shepherd. And we must remember that the true source of our security and our freedoms is not secular but *spiritual*. Until we recapture this truth, the relationship between the individual and the state will remain misshapen as we will continue to place the Golden Calf before the Golden Rule.

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¹ I disagree with Mr. Forstmann's reverence for "democracy" as America's philosophical/political essence ("republic" is the concept worthy of honor). However, I doubt his error reflects a conscious choice so much as America's common failure to distinguish between the two terms.

The political distinctions between democracy and republic are commonly recognized in the constitutionalist community. Essentially, a democracy places unlimited power in the hands of the people to do virtually anything, anytime 51% of 'em vote to do so. A republic, on the other hand, declares there are some fundamental (even absolute) principles which cannot be ignored, violated, or voted out. A democracy can vote to commit genocide; a republic truly based on Christian principles cannot.

² There may be other religious differences between a democracy and republic. For example, democracy seems premised on the idea that all men are not only created equal, but remain equal throughout their lives. From a Biblical perspective, that notion is absurd unless God wrote His Law "on the hearts" of ALL men, not just those of a particular faith. If God's law is not written on the hearts of all voters, how do they know how to vote righteously? By watching Dan Rather and the CBS Evening News? To the extent some voters' hearts do not contain God's Law, they can cast their democratic votes based on error, ego, greed, delusion and lust. Perhaps this was what founder John Adams implied when he said "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

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